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Multiple energy projects are as big as Montana's Big Sky

It doesn't happen too often, which is a major reason that construction plans worth hundreds of millions of dollars get plenty of attention around here.

Such projects are not entirely predictable and tend to bubble into public view from different directions, often over long periods of time.

As a result, many people may not have noticed that (a) there are many of them, and (b) almost all of them have to do with energy.

Add them up and you will see that Gov. Schweitzer was right when he was running around the country touting energy development: Montana is at the center of an emerging boom, and the examples are plentiful — and costly.

Everyone understands the need for energy, but something that frequently gets lost in the discussion is the scale — just how huge many of these projects are.

When the proposed billion-dollar coal-fired plant proposed for Great Falls got downsized to being a leaner, greener natural gas plant, it was still valued at \$210 million.

The wind energy farms popping up around central and eastern Montana are true giants, with one by NaturEner at Ethridge estimated to cost \$500 million, and another planned northwest of Shelby for \$800 million.

Both are much bigger than the 90-tower, 135-megawatt granddaddy of Montana's big wind farms, the one between Judith Gap and Harlowton — price tag: \$150 million.

There's even the recently approved Montana-Alberta Tie Line, a transmission line from here to Lethbridge with a price tag of \$213 million.

An additional big project planned for Great Falls probably has not gotten the attention it deserves in this age of wind: PPL Montana's expansion of Rainbow Dam's hydroelectricity-generating capacity.

The project will almost double the amount of electricity the dam produces, will employ 200 people in the 2 1/2-year construction phase, and will cost an estimated \$230 million.

When done, the new plant will add to PPL's wholesale portfolio already drawn from 10 other dams and coal-fired power and sold on the open market to other companies, including NorthWestern Energy.

"You just undergo a constant cycle of rebuilding and investment," said David Hoffman, PPL Montana's director of external affairs, "but typically not of this magnitude."

About the only thing in our region that comes close to matching the scale and cost of these energy behemoths occurs in health care, where Benefis Health System has a \$400 million, 10-year master plan.

But even there, the impressive, just-completed patient tower cost "just" \$85 million.

The imposing new Missouri River Federal Courthouse on the river along Central Avenue West carried a price tag of a measly \$16.4 million.

We applaud PPL's investment in a new, fish-friendly powerhouse at Rainbow Dam just below Giant Springs.

And we marvel at just how big energy has gotten to be in Montana.

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